

Internal communications: 5 tips for law firm competitive advantage

By Jocelyn Brumbaugh, *The Brumbaugh Group*

APRIL 16, 2018

The legal landscape is more competitive than ever, and retaining the brightest and best has never been trickier. Smart leaders recognize the importance of properly informing and activating their best resource: their people.

Fortune 500 companies have long recognized the value of keeping employees informed about enterprise strategy and the good work that supports it every day. These firms invest heavily in internal communications infrastructure, staffing and leadership time to ensure their people understand the business and where it is headed.

For these firms, employee activation has paid off in countless ways. Employees who understand a company's goals and their role in achieving them are more engaged in their work and the broader company mission. They are more productive and more likely to stay with the company, reducing turnover and positively impacting the bottom line.

Law firms, on the other hand, have been slow to adapt. While they are quick to acknowledge that their most important asset is their people, they often fail to keep their attorneys and other staff informed about strategic pursuits and the firm's day-to-day activities.

Many law firms believe it is enough to engage the media through public relations efforts, but such a limited strategy leaves an internal information vacuum that is often filled with rumors and assumptions. The negative impact of this approach can creep up on a firm, leaving leaders scratching their heads when people head for the door in droves.

HOW INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS CAN BENEFIT A FIRM

A solid internal communications plan can significantly boost a law firm's bottom line.

Improve lateral integration

Firms that spread the right internal messages about new lateral partners find these hires integrate much sooner, which can be key to a firm's growth. According to American Lawyer Magazine, it can take up to 14 months to replace top-performing partners and cost up to 400 percent of their salary in executive time and out-of-pocket costs.

This focus on laterals is here to stay. American Lawyer's Laterals Report from February 2018 showed that although lateral activity was down from its peak in 2016, nearly 2,900 partner moves occurred in 2017.

Couple that report with a recent Altman Weil survey that shows almost all firms with more than 250 lawyers see lateral hiring as part of their growth strategy, and it is clear that firms will continue to spend extensive time and resources to bring in laterals. A well-executed internal communications plan will ensure more return on that investment.

When people do not understand how they fit in, worry can distract from an efficient workplace.

Give leaders credibility when they need it most

Building a solid communications infrastructure when things are going smoothly — rather than in response to a crisis or other unexpected event — earns trust and ensures attorneys and staff will listen when leaders have something to say. If the first words from the captain are, "Don't mind that water covering your shoes," the crew might very well abandon ship.

Poor internal communication during major events such as mergers and transitions can also come with a hefty price tag. Leaders often focus exclusively on the timing of external media and worry about leaks instead of ensuring that people feel good about the transition and what is to come. When people do not understand how they fit in, worry can distract from an efficient workplace.

Boost morale among staff

On the flip side, a thoughtful internal communications plan can rally the troops. Engaged attorneys and staff are more productive and willing to go the extra mile for their boss and their firm. They understand the big picture and their important role in moving the firm forward.

Increase retention of attorneys and staff

Improved morale leads to better retention. As the war for talent continues, a firm that has a revolving-door reputation can make it easier for high performers to walk — and harder to replace them.

Strengthen a firm's reputation in the community

Informed partners, associates and staff are a law firm's best ambassadors, as positive word of mouth goes a long way in establishing a firm as a leader in business and in the community. What people say about their job and their firm at cocktail parties matters.

Prevent rumors

Speculation can quickly get out of hand when a firm fails to communicate regularly. People want to understand the bigger meaning in all transitions — good and bad — and a firm's failure to communicate effectively means people will create their own narrative about what happened and what is next.

5 TIPS FOR IMPROVING INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Here are five ways to use internal communications to drive engagement, boost morale and foster better productivity.

1. Set the tone with regular leadership communication

Strategic law firm leaders understand that communication is key to their success. In a partnership model, strong direction from leaders is the glue that holds the firm together and transforms it from a confederation of independent contractors into a cohesive team.

Consistency is key here. Partners, associates and staff need to hear what the firm's main goals are and why they are meaningful.

This perspective needs to be repeated and updated as external factors cause the firm's goals to evolve. Ways to achieve this include:

- Set goals for the year and provide updates on how the firm stacked up against last year's goals.
- Hold a town hall or give another such state-of-the-firm presentation at least once a year.
- Strive to send quarterly email updates rather than sporadic posts.
- Make it a priority to visit every firm office regularly.

Keep in mind that access to leadership is important to all partners, who look to firm leaders for big-picture guidance on how the firm can help their practice. It is not necessary to meet individually with every partner, but it is important to speak with department heads and encourage them to relay key messages to their teams.

2. Give laterals the language they need for success

Consistent, well-crafted messaging plays a vital role in indoctrinating new people into the firm's culture. Firms that neglect internal communications and focus solely on clients and other external audiences will find themselves facing the exorbitant expenses that come with acquiring and losing new laterals.

Firms must communicate internally how each lateral will add value to the firm, as well as how this person will help legacy partners solve problems for their existing clients. These messages should be communicated to the entire law firm through multiple internal channels, and modified messaging can be used for the firm's website, press releases and client-facing materials.

The way a firm approaches internal communications during difficult times has staying power that impacts a firm's culture, team spirit and bottom line for much longer than the current crisis.

Crucial to lateral messaging is not waiting until new hires show up on their first day. It is during their transition from a former firm to a new one when laterals most need clear messaging to properly articulate their new firm's platform, practices and other differentiators. Give them the tools they need to convince their clients to come along — because their former firm is already planning its messaging to convince clients to stay.

This can greatly impact the bottom line. Research shows that lateral hiring as a growth strategy is making it even more critical to integrate new laterals whether they are hired individually or in groups.

3. Tell your people first — in good times and bad

Time firm announcements so that all attorneys and staff receive news straight from leadership, not from the legal or general press. No one wants to be surprised or embarrassed by hearing news about their own firm from the media or, even worse, a client.

An internal message puts the news in context, provides meaning and gives staff a chance to digest the information and form a positive opinion.

The way a firm approaches internal communications during difficult times has staying power that impacts a firm's culture, team spirit and bottom line for much longer than the current crisis.

4. Boost engagement through social media

Share the firm's day-to-day successes — case wins, accolades, speaking engagements, publications and other achievements — on social media. Also, make it a practice to congratulate an individual or a team with a note that includes a link to the post.

In addition to serving as an internal communications tool that builds camaraderie and teamwork, this approach also puts the accomplishments of attorneys and staff directly in front of their social media connections, further spreading the good news the firm is making, creating good will and establishing the firm as a valuable resource.

5. Do not rely on email as the sole communications tool

Once a firm hits the critical 50-people mark or multiple-offices threshold, more than an occasional email is needed to keep everyone informed and involved.

Firms should establish an effective internal intranet as the go-to source for stories about the firm and its people. An internal communications audit is another effective way to uncover how attorneys and staff get their information, especially in firms that have absorbed entire offices — and their cultures — along the way.

Firms that have grown quickly through mergers often find it difficult to keep track of nontraditional channels that are staples in certain offices. A casual firm birthday list may have morphed into an office's primary source for news. The only way to find such important channels is to ask.

CONCLUSION

As the legal landscape becomes increasingly competitive, law firms are slowly adopting strategies that have long been an imperative in the corporate world. They are learning that in-house communication is an essential element that cannot be ignored.

As the use of data, metrics, competitive intelligence and strategic business development plans is now the norm, the next law firm differentiator will be effective internal communications.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jocelyn Brumbaugh is a consultant with **The Brumbaugh Group**, which offers marketing strategy for law firms. She is also the founder of the marketing trade group Legal & Professional Services Counsel. She can be reached at jocelyn@brumbaughgroup.com.

Thomson Reuters develops and delivers intelligent information and solutions for professionals, connecting and empowering global markets. We enable professionals to make the decisions that matter most, all powered by the world's most trusted news organization.